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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002237

SIPDIS

NSC FOR KELLY MAGSAMEN, PETER VROOMAN, AND PUNEET TALWAR

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SUBJECT: SENIOR IRAQI MFA OFFICIAL ON IRAN-IRAQ RELATIONS

REF: BAGHDAD 2181

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Gary A. Grappo for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During an August 17 meeting with Post's Iran Watcher (IW),

Ambassador Taha Shukr al-Abbassi, head of the MFA's Neighboring Countries department responsible for Iran-Iraq relations (A/S equivalent), made the following points:

(1) Iraq seeks a bilateral relationship with Iran based on mutual respect and equality, a concept Iran has yet to embrace; (2) Iran is not forthcoming on border issues such as water rights and oil; (3) Iran will face an uprising if it moves against Rafsanjani, Moussavi, Karroubi and other opposition figures; (4) Ahmadinejad continues to pursue misguided policies akin to Saddam; and (5) Iran will seek to exploit the arrest of the three American citizens for its own political gain. END SUMMARY.

Iran-Iraq Relations: A Work in Progress

¶2. (C) During an August 17 meeting with Post's Iran Watcher (IW), Ambassador Taha

Shukr al-Abbassi (aka Taha Shukr), head of the MFA's Neighboring Countries division

(A/S equivalent), expressed disappointment with the Iranian government's (IRIG) inability and unwillingness to embrace Iraq as an equal partner rather than a subordinate proxy. 'We continue to deliver the message of equality to them,' he asserted, but the Iranians 'are not comfortable with this idea yet.' Commenting on what he perceived as a disconnect in IRIG actions to ensure a stable Iraq, Shukr asserted that the IRIG had reason to ensure Iraq's success now more than ever because 'they have their friends in the government.' According to Shukr, the IRIG considers the U.S.-GOI SOFA less a threat or mechanism for a permanent U.S. presence or attack on Iran, and more a predictable timetable for U.S. withdrawal.

Border Challenges

¶3. (C) In response to IW's query about ongoing GOI-IRIG border negotiations cited in press reports, Shukr explained that discussions had taken place between GOI-IRIG in Baghdad and Tehran over the past month, led by respective MFA officials and comprised of interagency representatives from security and intelligence agencies from both countries. Al-Sharq al-Awsat quoted GOI Deputy Foreign Minister Labid Abbawi's statement that the discussions with Iran over border issues 'are going well.'

¶ 4. (C) Shukr pointed out that the while the discussions offer an important venue for regular dialogue between the two sides 'the Iranians are not forthcoming' on sensitive issues of concern such as water rights, maritime boundaries, and access to oil fields along the border. The IRIG is systematically cutting off water from the Karun River in the south by building dams on the Iranian side of the border. Shukr added that in conversations with Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president expressed ignorance of the water restrictions and asked FM Mottaki to follow-up on the GOI allegation. 'We are still waiting,' Shukr noted. (NOTE: A Kurdish Alliance official also made similar charges against the IRIG in an interview with Al-Sharq al-Awsat. END NOTE.)

¶ 5. (C) Shukr accused the IRIG of encroaching on Iraqi territory in the Shatt al-Arab by laying claim to territorial waters and blocking access to Iraqi oil field workers elsewhere along the border. The Iranians have positioned border guards at eleven points along the border. (NOTE: Iraq-Iran border issues are Qalong the border. (NOTE: Iraq-Iran border issues are governed by the 1975 Algiers Agreement signed by then Iraqi Vice President Saddam Hussein and the Shah of Iran. See para 9 for additional background. END NOTE.)

Ahmadinejad: Saddam's Alter Ego

¶ 6. (C) Shukr criticized Ahmadinejad for pursuing misguided policies, describing him as a 'mini Saddam' for seemingly

BAGHDAD 00002237 002 OF 002

taking cues from the deposed dictator's political playbook. Ahmadinejad's offer of free oil to impoverished countries was originally proposed by Saddam during the oil embargo, Shukr explained. 'I told Ahmadinejad that he should learn from Saddam's lesson on the nuclear issue, but he told me that Iran has passed the bottleneck on this matter.' As far as Shukr is concerned, this reveals the Iranian president's conviction in pursuing a nuclear program to its successful conclusion.

¶ 7. (C) Shukr predicted a popular uprising in Iran if the IRIG moves against Rafsanjani and other opposition figures, including Moussavi and Karroubi. He noted that the political turmoil in Iran has brought to the surface lingering discontent among Iran's minority populations, notably in Baluchistan. According to Shukr, following a recent bombing in Iran allegedly tied to the Pakistan-based Sunni Islamist group Jundullah, the IRIG falsely accused and subsequently executed three individuals arrested for unrelated crimes several days before the bomb attack. (NOTE: The GOI currently has three consulates in Iran -- Mashhad, Kermanshah, and Ahwaz -- with plans to open a fourth in Orumiyeh near Iran's Kurdish-populated northern region. END NOTE.)

Detained American Citizens

¶ 8. (C) Shukr confirmed that he was present during FM Zebari's meeting with Iranian Ambassador Qomi, where the latter confirmed the detention of the three Americans for allegedly entering Iran illegally. Echoing Zebari's speculation on the matter (see reftel), Shukr believes the IRIG will use the three Americans as leverage in future bargaining with the USG. Describing Qomi as an active and dynamic personality who spends a lot of time lobbying the GOI, Shukr said the Iranian ambassador gave no indication of an early release for the Americans.

BACKGROUND: Algiers Agreement

¶9. (SBU) The Algiers Agreement, which addresses border issues between Iraq and Iran, was signed in March 1975 between Iraqi Vice President Saddam Hussein and the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in the presence of former Algerian President Houari Boumedienne. Iraq regarded the agreement as null and void following the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, but allegedly chose to comply with it in 1990 after the invasion of Kuwait. Under the Agreement, the Shatt al-Arab waterway flowing into the Persian Gulf was divided in the middle based on the Al-Taluk line, the deepest point in the waterway. In exchange, Iran would cease its support for the Kurds who were at the time waging a war against the Iraq army in northern Iraq.

Comment

¶10. (C) Shukr's observations about Iran's unwillingness to embrace Iraq as a political equal and IRIG machinations on sensitive bilateral issues reveal underlying tensions between Baghdad and Tehran that are not always visible. Although less acrimonious and disputed than the Iraq-Kuwait border, the Iran-Iraq border issue merits close monitoring for its role in defining the tone of Iraq's evolving relationship with its dominating neighbor on issues that straddle the Arab-Persian fault line.

Biodata

¶11. (C) Shukr is a career diplomat with over 20 years of service in the MFA, including prior stints as Iraqi ambassador to Venezuela and Nigeria during Saddam's rule. He is from Mosul and is married with nine children. His eldest son, Sinan, works as an engineer for a medical Qeldest son, Sinan, works as an engineer for a medical company in Mosul affiliated with the Ministry of Industry and has applied for a Fulbright scholarship. Shukr is interested in enrolling two of his daughters in U.S. colleges next year. He speaks fluent English and while somewhat critical of the GOI, remains a dedicated public servant with an appreciation for cultivating Iraq's long-term ties with the U.S.

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